

Exposure Therapy

by batboyofficial

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Summary: How to work through the effects of trauma: A guide by Edgar and Shelley. This was alluded to in Miracle Enough. Pre-revival, miraculous survival, everyone is sad but healing.

Exposure Therapy

"Are you ready?"

"No. But let's not wait til I am. That will take too long, I think."

Shelley moved her hand from Edgar's hip to the small of his back, and Edgar shut down.

Edgar's back was no longer full of stitches, but it still bore the unmistakable scars of severe stab wounds. Any time anyone in the hospital had dressed or tended to his wounds, they had had to restrain him, or drug him, or both. The nurses had speculated that Shelley's presence might do something to ease his anxiety, only to rush her out of the room when it became apparent that Edgar's self-defense instinct only ramped up with his twin nearby.

"I didn't mean to fight them," he had tearfully explained to her afterward. "But it made me think, well, if they're touching me - and the touch hurts - then they just need to incapacitate me, and then there's nothing protecting you - and I know it's foolish, I know it's ridiculous, I know they aren't going to hurt me but if something happens to me, who will keep you safe?"

"Don't worry about that now," Shelley had told him. "It's my job to keep you safe for a while."

She had held him, then, and he had put his head on her shoulder, curled like a frightened child against her chest.

The moment he was allowed, Edgar was up and out of the hospital. It

didn't matter that the only thing waiting was a house on the outskirts of a town that loathed them; the Parkers were just happy to be away from the acrid smell of disinfectant and illness. They didn't stay in the house long. Shelley sold it as quickly as possible, accepting less than half of what the house was worth, and then they were gone, heading west, as far from Hope Falls as they could manage, with Edgar still recovering.

Edgar was nowhere near as flexible as he used to be. His back was stiff with pain almost all the time, and it hurt him to bend and twist and even to lean against things for too long. He and Shelley had agreed, back in the hospital, that there was no point in denying the relationship between them, and they began their life together as a couple by bonding through Edgar's limitations. Shelley helped him bathe and dress, but every time she tried to wash his back, Edgar broke down sobbing.

It was Edgar's idea to begin exposure therapy. ("I read about it at the library last week," he had explained. "If you help me push my boundaries just a little bit more every session, eventually it will be something I can do, without any trouble.")

"What happens when you start hating me for doing something that fucks you up that much?" Shelley had asked him.

"Do you really think I could ever hate you?" Edgar had whispered. With his hands on her body, Shelley had had to agree that, no, he could not hate her.)

So there they were, and Shelley's hand was on Edgar's back, and he had dissolved into a shuddering, sobbing mess.

She began to move her hand, but Edgar's arm shot out and restrained her. So she waited patiently. It took a few minutes, but the sobs slowed, and then gave way to shaky, laboured breathing, and then finally to silence, broken only by the occasional whimper.

"Say it," Edgar breathed. Then, polite to a fault, he added: "Please."

"It's only me, Edgar. It's Shelley. We're in Chicago, Illinois. This is our apartment. We're miles away from Hope Falls. No one else is here. It's just me touching you. And when you ask me to, I'll move my hand away. The second you ask me. I won't wait, and I won't argue. It's only there as long as you want me to keep it there."

"The door is locked?"

"The door is locked," Shelley echoed dutifully.

"And your - Dr Parker isn't here?"

"No," she said, ignoring the lump in her throat. "He's gone, and he can't ever come near you, ever again."

That part always hurt to say.

There was a moment of silence before Edgar lifted his chin and whispered, "please hold me."

So Shelley draped her arm across his shoulder and pulled him close, her hand resting still against the small of his back. She pretended not to notice him sneaking glances at their alarm clock every few seconds. She simply sat with him, moving as little as possible.

Five minutes passed, nearly to the second, and Edgar immediately pushed her hand away from his back and slumped across her lap.

"You made it. Lovely boy," she murmured, ghosting her fingertips along his sides and arms and scratching his scalp the way he liked. "Look how far you've come. I knew you could do it."

"I almost couldn't," he confessed, his voice muffled by her leg.

"But you did, and that's what counts. I'm so proud of you." Edgar turned his face towards her and cupped her cheek in his palm; she turned her face and peppered his hand with kisses.

"You know I can only do it because it's you," he told her.

"I don't care why you can do it, sugar. You're still doing it. You couldn't do this last week. You push yourself so hard, my brave boy, and I'm so proud of you."

"I trust you, Shelley," he whispered. "You've always been so good to me. You've always told me exactly what you think, you've never lied to me, you've never hurt me."

"Well, you've never hurt me either."

"I could have, though, considering - what I am. And what I'm not."

"Do you honestly mean to tell me, after everything we've been through, that I should be scared of bats? Edgar, bats are like, an inch long."

"My species is closer to three inches long."

Kissing his hand suddenly wasn't enough. She moved her legs out from underneath him and leaned over him, threatening, "I'm gonna kiss you til you forget how to talk, you pedantic little shit."

And Edgar simply smiled up at her, his big eyes full of trust and adoration, and chirruped battily.

End
file.